

Date: November 12, 2020

To: Supervisor Kathryn Barger and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors

**CC: Mayor Eric Garcetti, City Council President Nury Martinez and the Los Angeles City Council
Senior Executives of Charter Spectrum, AT&T, Frontier, T-Mobile and Verizon**

Re: Los Angeles Low-Income Children and Families Need Digital Equity

On behalf of the over 250,000 children and families our organizations serve, we call on your leadership to champion the urgent need of addressing our County's long-term underlying digital inequities that include lack of high-speed internet infrastructure investments in our County's under-resourced neighborhoods, few affordable internet programs for those who live at or below the poverty line, and insufficient regulatory oversight of internet service providers.

We appreciate the motion passed unanimously by the County Board of Supervisors earlier this month directing the Department of Public Works and the Department of Regional Planning to report back to the Board in 90 days with their plan to provide more equitable access to high-speed internet for students and workers in need. We submit this letter outlining elements the plan should incorporate to fully meet the needs of the students and families we serve. We also implore that the County hold internet service providers (ISPs) responsible for the solutions necessary and at minimum to provide the transparency necessary to comprehensively address digital inequities.

A Generation of Students is at Stake

In Los Angeles County, 1 in 4 school age children lack the technological resources to access distance learning, which represents approximately 250,000 families. Gaps are even more profound in historically underserved neighborhoods like Watts, South Los Angeles, Pico/Union, East Los Angeles, South East Los Angeles, Pacoima, and Panorama City, where students with the greatest unmet needs are concentrated.¹

This digital divide has always been a fundamental aspect of the opportunity gap facing low income students and students of color, but the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated digital segregation, making addressing digital inequity a legal and moral imperative. The California Constitution guarantees the right to a quality education, and as long as distance learning is in place, quality broadband access must be a guaranteed right as well. But for tens of thousands of low-income students, each day without the internet is a day without access to quality instruction, learning opportunities and connection to their school communities. We know that even if the most optimistic predictions for the pandemic play out, our society will never go back to a point where internet access for students is anything less than a necessity. In addition to accessing public education, the internet is also the gateway for accessing several other basic needs including healthcare and employment. **Fundamentally, we believe the internet is a basic life necessity and should be regulated like the public good it is.**

LAUSD has intervened to ensure its students have -- at a minimum -- access to mobile internet by distributing mobile hotspots to all students who have need. Despite the best efforts by district officials, families report connectivity issues beyond the District's control that plague the highest need areas across Los Angeles. These

¹ USC Annenberg Connected Cities and Inclusive Growth (CCIG) Policy Brief # 5, "[COVID-19 and the Distance Learning Gap](#)," April 2020.

issues include inadequate infrastructure, unaffordable prices, provider monopolies over specific areas, upselling, and inadequate customer service. We call upon all elected bodies representing Los Angeles children and families to work together to address this gross inequity. All elected leaders must coordinate to resolve digital segregation and hold Internet Service Providers (ISPs) accountable.

The County Must Take Action to Provide Immediate Relief

1. Expand free public access hotspots to at least 100 locations in under-resourced neighborhoods, with adequate staffing and space for students to access (e.g. parks, libraries, WorkSource Centers, parking lots, schools).
2. Provide no-cost high-speed internet in all public housing developments managed by the City and County, as recently announced is underway for four LA public housing developments.²
3. Convene a cross-sector task force focused on monitoring the specific number of under-connected households in each neighborhood and spurring solutions to meet the need.
4. The County's Plan must:
 - a. Outline specific strategies with delineated goal benchmarks
 - b. Identify funding to implement strategies
 - c. Addresses how the County will collaborate with all levels of government to advance digital equity

Addressing Systemic Inequities Requires Public Investment and Holding ISPs Accountable

1. Launch initiative to build public high-speed internet infrastructure in low-income communities and operate (and/or regulate) it as a public utility to ensure universal access by 2022.
2. Ensure safeguards to protect privacy rights in all public internet initiatives.
3. Make public funding, approvals and rights-of-way contingent on internet service providers taking the following actions:
 - a. Provide data to the City and County enumerating the number of households in each neighborhood or zip code currently served with a low-cost plan (protected by non-disclosure agreement).
 - b. Streamline eligibility and sign-up process for residential broadband by creating a single application and standards for ISP processing and service.
 - c. Partner with public schools to automate eligibility based on free and reduced-price lunch data and waive eligibility requirements based on social security number or past financial history.
 - d. Fully fund residential broadband service for all families in need through the end of the school year, providing public reporting and verification of installation and service.

We recognize that resolving digital inequities will involve action from all levels of government - city, county, state and federal - with each having an obligation to do all it can on behalf of its residents. While we recognize your recent motion, that is just the first step. We ask that you work with all levels of government to identify ways to provide immediate relief to families while simultaneously working towards systemic solutions. Above all, we implore you to hold ISPs responsible for being transparent and proactive in implementing solutions. We ask for a public convening to discuss our demands and surface additional solutions.

Thank you,

² ["Mayor Garcetti Announces Free Internet Access to Residents in Four Public Housing Communities."](#) October 2020.

